
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District: **Walter Reed Army Medical Center Historic District**

(x) Agenda

Meeting Date: **August 4, 2016**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**

(x) Draft design guidelines

TPWR Developer LLC, a joint venture of Hines-Urban Atlantic-Triden,¹ presents for comment draft design guidelines for the Walter Reed Army Medical Center historic district.

Review background

In September 2012, the Board commented on a draft small-area plan for the private redevelopment of much of the campus. That plan was later approved by City Council.

The Board designated the entire campus a historic district in April 2014.

A year ago, the Board reviewed a more developed master plan for the campus. At that time, the Board's action included the following recommendations:

The Board found that razing Buildings 31, 38 and 84 is contrary to the purposes of the preservation law, because demolition would fail to retain and enhance three contributing buildings. It recommended that, if the applicant intends to proceed to the Mayor's Agent, the applicant develop specific special-merit projects for the reuse of those building sites.

The Board supported the proposed road improvements in general, asking for additional existing and proposed topographic information, especially between Buildings 1 and 7.²

The Board supported the proposed demolition of rear additions to Building 1, namely Buildings/additions 1DA, 1G, 1J, 1K, 1L, 5 and 92.

The Board generally supported the heights proposed for new buildings, with the caveat that more information is necessary to be definitive on each, especially for the heights of Buildings H through J and their relationships to each other and to Building 1, as well as more information on massing, views, the treatment of spaces between and landscape in general. The Board expressed some concern about possible crowding of Building 11 by Building Z and of Buildings 8 and 9 by Building(s) U/V.

¹ With EHT Traceries Inc., Heritage Landscapes LLC, Torti Gallas Urban Inc., and Oehme van Sweden Inc.

² Some of these improvements are depicted in the present document, as at page 223, but they have not finished review.

More recently, the Board approved a concept for additions and alterations to one of the historic buildings (Delano Hall) to be adaptively reused once much of the property is conveyed to the District of Columbia by the U.S. Army.

Design guidelines

The present design guidelines are valuable for gathering in one place much of the background information on the property, the master plan, and process. The document provides a more detailed survey of elements, especially objects in the landscape, than what is contained in the historic district nomination.

On page 18, it is stated that the Board does not have the authority “to approve Master Plans or Design Guidelines.” While the first is true, the second is not quite so; the Board does adopt both topical and neighborhood guidelines (as for Anacostia and Meridian Hill, for instance) that have been developed with the staff and “branded” a product of the Historic Preservation Office. On the other hand, the Board has simply commented design guidelines developed by neighborhood groups (e.g., Mount Pleasant and Woodley Park), or guidelines that have been incorporated into campus master plans (as at Saint Elizabeths Hospital and the Armed Forces Retirement Home), in order to head off inconsistencies with D.C. preservation standards.

The design guidelines provide mostly guidance on new construction. HPO’s few comments on the draft follow.

The guidelines divide the campus into character areas which largely reflect differences in the history and pattern of development (pp. 38-43). One may quibble with the exact boundaries—the entire Building 1 and the historic buildings to the east should probably be included in the same character area based on the historic functional and axial relationships between them—but the boundaries appear to be based largely on what are or will be edges of cohesive landscape areas, which is a sound enough proposition.

The document contains valuable analysis of existing buildings. It conveys the idea that there should be flexibility in new design and that the demands of compatibility lessen with distance; i.e., the northern campus area need not to be as compatible in all respects, given the lack of historic buildings in the vicinity to which to compare the new.

At the same time, the document addresses the lack of a strong orthogonal pattern in an “informal zone” of the southern character area. It recommends that new buildings *should* have “non-cardinal orientations” (p. 145) rather than simply concluding that flexibility in orientation and footprint is acceptable on these irregular sites. In this, the guidelines seem to be influenced by the figures on the master plan maps rather than facts on the ground. There is no reason why the north wall of Building Z, for instance, needs to be on a tangent to the curve of the portion of Main Drive that it faces (p. 147). Or why Building(s) W/X/Y couldn’t be constructed parallel and perpendicular to Aspen Street, if preferred. The present almost random arrangement of buildings near the southeast corner of the campus does not constitute a tertiary axis, but points out the lack of one; it is hard to justify for the sake of a “Primary Axis 3” the particular orientation or extension of the southwest wing of Building(s) U/V and its wrapping around the historic firehouse. Its corner site and its relationship to Buildings 8 and 9 seem the more powerful determinants of U/V’s footprint. The small number of buildings to be constructed in

the southern character area suggests that it is easier to design each to its particular context than to create a rule that governs them all.

The guidelines contain relatively little on the treatment of the existing buildings, other than by reference to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards or, by implication, description of the prevailing patterns of materials, elements and massing, which would suggest how additions might be designed. The new-construction guidelines do touch on hierarchies in existing buildings, whose logic may be extended to additions. Some thought about where additions might be possible and what they might consist of would not be unwelcome.

Similarly, there is little on demolition, except reference to the HRPB process for reviewing razes or substantial demolitions of historic buildings. Otherwise, demolition is merely implied by the master plan maps and by non-character-defining additions called out in survey information.

It is recommended that the term "industrial glass" be eliminated as an alternate name for one of the suggested styles of architecture (p. 192). Flexibility in fenestration is appropriate and even important, especially in the northern character area, and the prototypes illustrated are not bad, we should not inadvertently encourage architects and builders to design buildings that look like factories—even historic factories. Even the heating plant, the campus's only major industrial building, has masonry walls, gabled roofs, and columns of ganged wood-framed windows.

It is not so clear that an entire sector "should" be of one style or another (p. 189). Again, while promoting flexibility, especially the farther from the major historic buildings, one must also keep in mind an overarching idea of somehow making the campus read as one. One example of this prescriptivism is slating the buildings for "3D," flanking the rear wing of Building 1, as "Traditional Glass" or "Contemporary," when the "3B" area they face is all to be "Traditional Wall" in deference to that wing. Framing that wing, the adjacent buildings *should* be distinct, but the logic doesn't entirely follow.

"Contemporary" buildings are treated differently from the more traditional approaches in terms of prescriptions for materials and windows (pp. 174, 194). We should be avoid waiving rigor in consideration of exterior materials and window details/depths for contemporary buildings, because sometimes these make all the difference to the success of contemporary design.³

A discussion of the massing of new buildings (p. 157) draws from that of historic ones, correctly perceiving that a hierarchy of size and importance expresses itself in pavilions, wings, etc. The smaller, simpler historic buildings are characterized as secondary and tertiary, and their character is to inspire new "secondary" and "tertiary" buildings. It is a worthy point that the harmony of a campus relies in part on preventing all the buildings from competing with each other. Yet, it is unclear how one ranks the new buildings, i.e., how an architect knows that his/her work is not primary. Again, historically it was prominence of function and the articulation of big buildings,

³ The recommendations drop some of the bullet points that apply to more historicist architecture, but some of them should apply to contemporary architecture, too. One minor example is that the guidelines expressly accept wire-cut brick (p. 163), but molded or pressed brick often looks better. Bonding patterns are less important in contemporary buildings, except where they are intentionally used decoratively. The more important characteristics are the texture, color, internal color variation and module.

so those remain the best guide. One might be more prescriptive in advance, based on the anticipated size and footprint of individual buildings and their locations.

Regarding further the modulation of large buildings, the guidelines say that long frontages should not exceed 220 feet without changes of plane for articulation (p. 153). That itself is a considerable distance, and one might certainly consider breaking up smaller fronts.

From a planning point of view, the document is right to consider relationships of new construction to the built environment beyond the campus boundaries (pp. 178-187). While the installation was not especially outward-looking, and the Board's charge is to ensure compatibility with the character of the historic district and not beyond, it is appropriate to acknowledge relationships across streets for new buildings that *will* be outward-looking. The master plan certainly considered such relationships in its recommendation to step down to townhouses along Fern Street.

Regarding those townhouses, more direction might be added to the guidelines' recommendations beyond materials and porches. HPO has previously raised concerns about the proportions of such homes, less for their relationship to residential Fern Street and more for their own sake. The zoning permits them to be of four stories' height, but four stories is an awkward proportion, as the center of gravity lands between two stories above and two below. Preferable would be houses that do not exceed three stories, but certainly any fourth story should be expressed as a distinct attic to bring down the cornice height.

The concern for connecting to the neighborhoods beyond the campus is also expressed in the removal of most of the perimeter fencing (p. 239 and elsewhere). The guidelines acknowledge that the boundary has historic significance and serves as a signal of entering a special place. For that reason, gates and fencing at either end of Main Drive would be retained. On the other hand, the entire Aspen Street length of fence and that section stretching north from Georgia Avenue above Building 6 and westward on Fern to 13th Street postdate the campus's period of significance. A non-contributing or non-character-defining feature then, these sections of the fence are subject to removal. Removal makes most sense where there are expected to be commercial uses, in the north character area. Yet, before their removal becomes the rule, it is worth considering the utility of portions of even non-historic fence. Schools frequently prefer perimeter fences for security, and the D.C. International School has expressed an interest in retaining the fence south of Delano Hall (Building 11) to control access from Aspen Street. Neighboring users might feel the same. Even in the north character area, gate piers at Georgia Avenue and Elder Street make sense as a boundary signal.

An aspect of fencing that is even more important to address is the discouragement of fences within the campus. This is addressed only in the most indirect sense by the statement of the essential principle that the campus must be seen as a unity.

There are recommendations for how the southern perimeter's topography and trees would be treated, but we still have yet to see a design for the proposed multi-use path along Aspen Street, a feature that would affect all such considerations.

The landscape guidelines promote a continuity of public-realm hardscape materials and treatments and street trees throughout the campus. They also provide some idea of how

stormwater management might be facilitated and provide prototypes for special landscapes suited to private courtyards and public recreation areas.

What is not as clear is, how might we promote continuity through the front yards of the new parcels, where they occur? That is, the historic pattern is for lead walks to approach central doors through lawns dotted with clumps of trees and/or trees lining the street. Much of the new development will have a zero-lot-line condition, but not all. So, how can we tie it all together? How do we achieve the “more trees” that the guidelines encourage in the northern part of campus, and distinguish between what a parcel holder *may* do and what he/she it *shall* do for the common good?

